

🌀 Listening as Key to Supporting Kindergarten Writers

by Katie Van Sluys with Mariel Laureano

Meet the Teacher

In her ninth year of teaching, Mariel Laureano became a kindergarten teacher at the same Chicago public school where she began her teaching career. The school is situated within a small community that has historically been home to predominately Latino/a families. Mariel has worked with students and families in the community through many of the challenges that accompany the gentrification of neighborhoods, including the displacement of families and threats of school closings. Before teaching kindergarten, Mariel worked for seven years as a middle grades teacher and for one year as a school-based literacy coach. One of Mariel's great qualities as a literacy coach and a classroom teacher is that she is, first and foremost, a listener. From the youngest child to her learning colleagues, Mariel listens. Through careful listening, she is able to provide necessary support for learners as they inquire into issues, concepts, and ideas that matter.



In the following vignette, we enter Mariel's classroom as her kindergartners begin their day. Through the events of one morning, we see ways that Mariel lives her belief that careful listening is foundational to good teaching, as well as ways that she builds on the resources children bring to school, including home languages. She views such resources as assets to be celebrated and developed throughout students' lives.

Teaching and Learning Moments in Mariel's Classroom

Walking into Mariel's kindergarten classroom, children, family members, colleagues, and visitors are immediately aware that this environment is not only physically inviting but is also a space filled with energy. Visitors are compelled to linger, watch, listen, and attend to the many ways that class members learn *and* teach as they read, write, draw, move, talk, sing, and so on. One of the first things visitors see is a small table set up with a simple notebook housing children's daily sign-in lists. Turning the pages, we see children's writing progress from copying their first names to the independent use of conventions as they write their first and last names using spacing and upper-case as well as lowercase letters.

Looking up from the notebook, we notice that the walls of the classroom are lined with student work and tools for student learning. For example, we see an interactive

An alternative option to the interactive word wall is to have students keep word journals; set aside specific times each day to add to them. Students could be encouraged to trade words with classmates to expand their knowledge.

Children can help select books for baskets, making decisions about genre, topics, and stories that would be purposeful and appealing. Twenty minutes could be set aside on Fridays for students to fill book baskets for the next week.

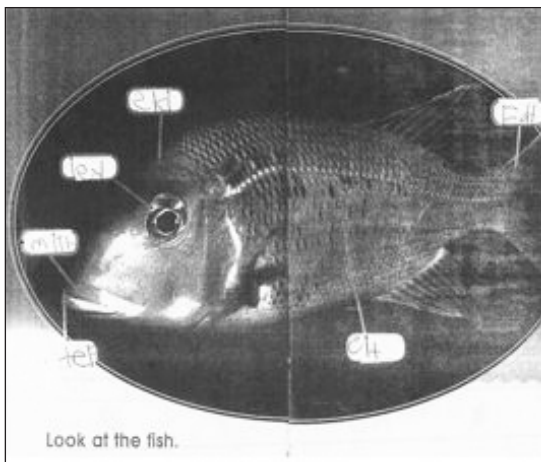
word wall placed at a level where five- and six-year-olds can remove the words to use them in support of their reading and writing and return them when finished. Adjacent to the word wall, a colorful rug designates a class meeting space partitioned off by a bookcase on one side and kindergarten-size benches on the other side.

Books are arranged in baskets in the classroom library so that book covers always face outward with clear labels separating books by topic, genre, and language, for example, "Animal Books" and "Libros en Español." Additional book baskets are placed in the center of each round table in the classroom. The baskets are filled with a wide range of books to represent different student interests, reading abilities, and classroom themes of inquiry. Today, for example, a basket at Javier's table speaks to his current curiosity about nocturnal animals. It contains books about bats as well as a variety of other nonfiction books with diverse text features and organization. A basket at Itzel's table contains nonfiction books as well as storybooks such as *Green Eggs and Ham* in both Spanish and English.

The cozy, purposeful feeling in this room is deepened by features such as the fish tank, the daily letter written by the teacher to the children (posted for everyone to read), and student work hung from the clotheslines strung across the room. Each day in this classroom is unique and characterized by a lively hum of people engaged in serious, important work, but each day is also grounded in predictable structures that give children support and confidence.

To understand more about a few of these predictable structures, we spend time in Room 106 on a particular morning to follow the children as writers and readers. As usual, the children enter the room to find their morning work waiting for them. Today, they are asked to make connections to a fish diagram that fascinated them during whole-class shared reading the previous day. Building

from their interest, Mariel has photocopied the diagram, deleting the words labeling the head, tail, scales, fin, and so on. The children check the front board and see that as their first task of the day, they are invited to label their fish diagrams and then make a diagram of their own. After hanging up backpacks and signing in, the children settle into their labeling tasks, excited to pick up where they left off the day before. While the children work, Mariel attends to the typical morning needs of individual children and then begins conferring with students about their writing.



As she kneels by Tomás, he points to the fish's scales on the diagram and asks, "What is this?"

"What do *you* think?" Mariel replies, turning the responsibility back to the child. "Skin," Tomás responds, and he begins to subvocalize sounds as he works to construct the word *skin* to label the scales on his diagram: "/s/ /k/ /i/." Knowing the child's needs at this moment in time, Mariel makes the decision not to correct his word choice (*skin* instead of *scales*), but to focus on supporting completing his construction of the word *skin* by helping him think about the ending sound. "What else do you hear in *skin*?" she asks. "Say the word out loud and think about the very last sound you hear."

Mariel leaves Tomás and makes her way around the class as children draw support from her but also from each other and from the resources around the room. Some children walk over to a class-made diagram posted on the wall to gain further insights about which parts of a diagram are considered labels. Others talk quietly with each other as they make decisions about what should be written on the labels and how to construct words.

Productive talk of this kind does not emerge in a vacuum. Mariel consistently provides whole-group, small-group, and one-to-one demonstrations of how to think about constructing texts. She is explicit in asking the children to think in the same way when they work alone or with classmates. She frequently validates this kind of thinking by celebrating specific instances of its occurrence: "Did you see the way Tomás was thinking about how to write *skin* today? Tomás, would you please tell us what you did?"

As morning work time comes to a close, Mariel uses the beginning and ending sounds of children's names as a signal for them to gather their work and transition to morning meeting: "If your name starts with /z/, bring your work. If your name ends in /n/, bring your work." During group meeting, Mariel takes the opportunity to build on the students' enthusiasm for yesterday's nonfiction book about fish to deepen their ability to use and create informational texts. Today she introduces a new book, Steve Jenkins's *What Do You Do with a Tail Like This?* Briefly, she guides the children to make predictions about the text as they explore the cover and title. The children share their curiosities about the book, and Mariel reads a few selected pages aloud, pages that attend to what various animals do with their ears. She stops now and then to discuss new insights about content, but also about ways the author presents information using both text and illustration. Then she suggests that the class also create a book about ears—about what animals do with their ears—and each child will create a page.

Javier heads to his seat, eager to share facts and findings from his active, science-oriented reading life, which includes many books about

A labeling exercise could work with almost any topic of inquiry and presents a great way to build from prior knowledge and vocabulary.

Student-made pages for class books can be about any topic of study and are easy to put together. Hint: Take digital photos of children's illustrations and writing and download into PowerPoint to make pages of books that can be projected and/or printed and bound.

bats. As a writer who has spent much of his first five years of life thinking and learning in Spanish, Javier’s oral language skills in English reveal his experience as an emerging bilingual speaker. Sensitive to this, Mariel is deliberate in supporting his use of Spanish while providing well-planned opportunities for him to continue adding English to his language repertoire. Javier begins by drawing a bat on the top of his paper. Mariel approaches him for a brief conference:

MARIEL: OK, you’ve got your bat, what do you want to say about the bat?

JAVIER: He’s creepy because he can use his ears. When some things talk, he flies and follows the noise where it’s coming from.

MARIEL: So the bat uses his ears to follow the noise.

JAVIER: [Javier begins to write: *A bat is cool because he uses his*—Then he makes the sounds out loud as he attempts to write *ears*] h . . . e . . . e . . . r . . . s

MARIEL: Let’s stop and review to see what you can add to it. [She reads] A bat is cool because he uses his ears [pause]. What did you say he uses his ears for?

JAVIER: Following the noise.

One-on-one conferences provide unparalleled opportunities to gauge an individual child’s learning. Fit in conferences at every opportunity—as children are coming in, when they are at centers, on the playground, anywhere!

Mariel’s teaching strategy is clear: She asks a strategic question and then she listens. While listening, she focuses on understanding what Javier wants the reader to know. Javier regularly uses talk to frame and refine his thinking—he talks as he writes. Mariel knows it is important for him to use spoken English and, at times, Spanish to try out his thinking, to express what he knows. Then she uses her talk to reframe his thinking in conventional English by repeating his ideas back to him in somewhat different form. She echoes his thinking so he can hear new possibilities for expressing his ideas. She helps Javier understand that his message is what matters most, but that it is also important to use certain conventions to be able to communicate his message clearly to others.

Through this moment of teaching and learning, Mariel learns a little bit more about what Javier knows and needs to know as he continues to develop as a code breaker, meaning maker, and text user. She sees that he is beginning to differentiate between fiction and nonfiction, can identify and use text features to tell more about the subject at hand, and hear sounds in words as he segments sounds for writing. Through this moment, she learns that Javier knows that writers write for readers and that one's reading life can directly influence one's writing life.

Mariel's Journey: Pathways to Enacting These Practices

It is clear from this glimpse into Mariel's classroom that conferencing is a cornerstone of her teaching as she aims to meet individual student needs. She entered the profession with a commitment to making a place for talk as foundational to writing, but she deepened that commitment through her involvement in ongoing professional study. Over the years, she has continued to perfect her ability to engage the children in one-to-one conferences as well as whole-class discussions and then to listen, learn from their talk, and tailor her teaching to match their needs and potentials. She is able to do this by thinking about each child in conjunction with her strong professional knowledge about literacy learning and teaching and with her knowledge of each child's family and community resources.

Mariel came to this commitment to listening because of her professional reading, but also because of her convictions about knowing the children well. Her teaching is guided by a strong sense of responsibility to child, family, and community. She sees school as a community space that requires full inclusion and participation of families and community members, but she recognizes that she must take responsibility for engaging them by making herself a part of local community issues and getting to know families and their out-of-school lives. She believes that fulfilling her commitment to the community also means taking responsibility for moving each child forward in specific ways by listening to build on what the child already knows and then presenting new information to ensure growth.